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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000130

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2017

TAGS: PGOV PTER PHUM MOPS PREL CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: OPPOSITION LEADER SEEKS TO MEND PARTY
RIFT, MAYBE TOO LATE

REF: A) COLOMBO 102 B) COLOMBO 115 C) COLOMBO 127

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador met opposition leader Wickremesinghe on January 22 to urge him to seek common ground with his UNP critics, including leading dissident Karu Jayasuriya. Our only interest was in supporting the peace process, Ambassador noted, but the current round of political wrangling threatened to derail the MoU between the major parties (ref a). Wickremesinghe noted he had tried to accommodate party reformers by appointing them to party positions and acceding to their request for a Special Session on March 17 to reform the party constitution. He appeared unsure that he could hold his party together, however. Ranil observed that the President's strategy of attracting crossovers risked destabilizing the entire political structure in the South. He noted that the President's SLFP, the JVP and the SLMC were all having cohesion problems as a result of government pressure tactics. End summary.

¶2. (C) In a meeting on January 22, Ambassador urged leader of the UNP and the opposition Ranil Wickremesinghe to exercise leadership by reconciling with the dissidents in his party, sharing some power, and allowing more intra-party democracy. The U.S.'s only interest was in assisting the peace process, the Ambassador said, but we saw this as endangered by the ongoing internal political infighting. The peace process needed the SLFP-UNP MoU to drive it forward, and this required that both major parties remain strong and viable.

¶3. (C) Wickremesinghe noted that he planned to speak to Karu Jayasuriya, the nominal leader of the UNP dissident faction, later that day. He said that he needed to consult further with the entire senior UNP leadership. However, he did not think that the majority of his party could agree to the idea of accepting ministerial posts. Karu and the other potential cross-overs had an obligation to make the case for their strategy to the party as a whole, he added. Since Jayasuriya had openly expressed a lack of confidence in him, the subject of Karu resuming his previous function as deputy party leader

was not likely to come up, Ranil thought.

14. (C) Wickremesinghe defended his approach to intra-party democracy, saying that he had accepted the dissidents' proposal of holding a Special Session to amend the party constitution on March 17. Before then, a consultation process needed to take place with the various party organs about their composition, and how the members are selected. The party's Political Affairs Committee, representing a broad cross section of the various tendencies in the party, would meet in February to draft proposals for the various reforms. However, most of the party would have problems accepting that those who wanted to leave it should participate materially in the reform process.

15. (C) Ranil noted that he had tried to accommodate divergent views by nominating most of the dissidents to important party positions. However, it was difficult to consummate this reconciliation because the dissidents had yet to withdraw a court case they had filed against party decisions. In any case, the UNP realized that it would lose a significant part of its talent pool if the crossovers took place. Still, he said the party base was holding together and would continue to support the UNP in future elections.

16. (C) Wickremesinghe said that although he was naturally concerned about the future of his party, at the moment he was more preoccupied with rescuing the MoU between the SLFP and the UNP. Under its terms, he noted, the UNP had committed to working with the government on the peace process and had agreed to support it on the budget and not to introduce a no-confidence motion for two years. The President, by

COLOMBO 00000130 002 OF 002

failing to work with him to implement the MoU, and pursuing the crossover strategy to assure a narrow parliamentary majority, was actually destabilizing the entire political system in the South, Wickremesinghe said. Not just the UNP was having problems, but the JVP was experiencing internal difficulties as well in deciding whether to continue to support the government. He also mentioned the pressure that the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress was under from the government side (ref b).

17. (C) Ambassador underlined our point that only a solid parliamentary majority in favor of a strong peace proposal would give the government a mandate to conduct serious negotiations to end the conflict. Only the MoU had the potential to deliver such a majority. Ranil agreed, but reiterated that once the government violated the MoU by taking on the crossovers as ministers, the UNP would not be able to continue to implement the MoU. The government should not believe that it could recruit the JVP for a serious peace process, he added; the ultra-nationalists would keep attacking any reasonable proposals for compromise with the LTTE.

18. (C) Wickremesinghe believed that the government's back-up plan might be to call early elections in order to ensure itself a majority. The UNP was ready to fight an early election, he said, but as a practical matter, a ceasefire was a necessary condition for free and fair elections to proceed. It would not be possible to carry out credible polls in the North and East under war conditions, and the LTTE might attack election activities in the South as well. However, Ranil thought it would be appropriate to elect a new Parliament with a mandate to pass the constitutional reforms required for a settlement. Still, a ceasefire was the prerequisite for any such development.

19. (C) Wickremesinghe said that he was convinced the LTTE would seek a way to strike back after the government's capture of Vakarai (ref c). He thought the LTTE was following a strategy of tying down government security forces assets in the East, but he was not sure what the LTTE's riposte would be. The attack on the supply ship near Jaffna

showed that the LTTE was possibly trying to isolate Jaffna before striking there. The government and the international community should be trying to engage LTTE thinkers, for example, by arranging a visit with Nepalese Maoists to study the resolution of Nepal's conflict. However, the death of LTTE ideologist and chief negotiator Anton Balasingham left a void. There was now a dearth of interlocutors in the LTTE one could approach in this way.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Wickremesinghe appeared just as composed, but somewhat less self-assured than usual. He clearly was feeling under pressure and realized he might not win the battle to hold his party together. His efforts to reach out to the disaffected in his party nevertheless strike us as perhaps too little, too late. On the other hand, if he can manage to swallow some of his legendary pride, admit some mistakes, and make a frank appeal for unity to Jayasuriya and other would-be crossovers, he might still fend off the approaching UNP train wreck. (In fact, septel will report that early readouts on the outcome of the meeting with Jayasuriya indicate Ranil fell short of his goal.) We continue to think that the realization of Basil Rajapaksa's plan to provide the government with a simple majority in parliament is more likely to detract from the peace process than to reinforce it. There is considerable risk that the government hardliners will seek to press the military advantage from their recent success in Vakarai. They may then try to cash in on the expected political bonus for the President's party by calling new elections before the country - or the peace process) are ready.

BLAKE